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Cambodia: Story of One Massacre

Americans were outraged at the news that German SS men in 1944 had lined up captured American troops at Malmedy crossroads in Belgium and had mowed them down with machine guns. Twenty-four years later, Americans were horrified to hear that their own spooked soldiers had wiped out the defenseless men, women and children of Mylai village in Vietnam.

The Malmedy and Mylai massacres were Sunday School outings, however, compared to the retribution the communist conquerors have brought against their former foes in Cambodia. There is stark, staggering evidence that the communists, as one intelligence report put it, began "immediately executing all officers in the defeated army and their families."

The executions were kept quiet. "Since the KCP [communist party] had not established complete control over the country, the party ordered the executions carried out in such a manner as to not alarm the people."

The work of death is still going on inside Cambodia.

The grisly evidence — government documents, refugee accounts, medical records and smuggled photos — staggers the mind. The atrocities have been so monstrous that they can be better understood by focusing on a single, typical incident.

This is the story of what happened to Gen. Em San and the men who served under him in Siem Reap province. They were shot and battered to death before they had a chance to tell their story. But it has now been told by their executioners who fled to Thailand after a party purge.

Although the Khmer Rouge guerrillas did not defeat Gen. Em San in the field, he ordered his command to surrender to them after the government collapsed on April 17, 1975. Then he met the Khmer Rouge as they entered Siem Reap city. "He was arrested immediately and taken in his own jeep to Kompong Kdei in eastern Siem Reap province for interrogation," the witnesses recall.

His officers down to the rank of major were also rounded up and herded aboard trucks, "together with their wives and children." According to one account, they were told by their captors that they had been "invited" to attend independence ceremonies at Angkor Wat. Other witnesses thought the prisoners had been told "they were being sent to Angkor Wat to attend a special training course." In any event, they got no farther than Kompong Kdei where they were unloaded.

Next they were told there was a shortage of trucks so they would travel to Angkor Wat by motorcycle. Each captive officer was instructed to carry a length of rope in case the motorcycle broke down and had to be towed.

They waited until April 23 when a Khmer Rouge official showed up ostensibly to sign travel passes for them. Each prisoner, as he was processed, was told "it would be necessary to tie his hands behind his back because the high-level officer did not wish to take any risks."

Reports an intelligence summary grimly: "Each man was blindfolded, led to the edge of a ditch and beaten to death with a hoe. The executions took most of the day to complete. Although

the first few groups of officers were not aware that they were going to die, the latter group struggled strenuously to escape since the air was permeated with the stench of blood."

Back at Siem Reap, all officers below the rank of major were told they would be shipped off for "re-education." Four trucks delivered them to the Wat Loley temple.

Declares another intelligence report: "When the truck arrived at the temple, it was backed up to the temple entrance. As the officers were offloaded, the Khmer Rouge instructed them to strip down to their underwear. Their hands were tied behind them, and they were loaded back into the truck."

"The truck was then driven to a location approximately one kilometer northwest of the Wat in a forested area where three trenches were dug . . . When the truck arrived, the officers were ordered at gun point to jump down one by one into the trench. As they did, they were shot. When the truck was empty, it was driven back to Siem Reap for another load."

"This went on for seven consecutive days. Following the initial period of executions, persons were no longer shot but they were killed by a blow from a hoe against their head."

Finally in mid-May, according to still another intelligence report, Em San's enlisted men were hauled to Wat Loley for execution. "Four truck loads of men were moved to Wat Loley each day and were immediately executed by firing squads there. The bodies were buried together in large pits. This procedure continued daily for two weeks."